*Which?*craft in Post-War Britain: The Consumers' Association and the Politics of Affluence*

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Consumption has recently acquired key importance in re-interpreting post-war British politics. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has argued the Conservative construction of a popular alliance in opposition to rationing and controls was crucial to their electoral recovery after 1945 and in securing an advantage among women voters. A wealth of evidence indicates Labour, by contrast, had scant purchase on affluence in the later 1950s. It was not only, as Amy Black and Stephen Brooke would have it, "Labour's befuddlement at the problem of women and gender," but that it was ambivalent, if not hostile, towards the goods, lifestyles and values associated with consumerism and the people obtaining and exhibiting them. Other factors blur differentiation between the parties. Both were affiliated to the world of production— through their business and trade union links. Richard Findley has contended the Conservative abolition of resale price maintenance (RPM, whereby manufacturers fixed retail prices) in 1964, aroused electorally deleterious opposition from manufacturers and backbenchers. And while Labour consumerists were rare commodities, as is argued here, Labour revisionism made an important contribution to the Consumers' Association (CA).[1]

This focus on consumerism corrects the neglect of it by narratives like political consensus or historians' consuming passion with production and work. It arises from rethinking Britain's much vaunted "decline" as, for example, the transition to a post-industrial society. In Matthew Hilton's hands how the consumer "interest" was variously articulated and gendered becomes a means to unlock mod-

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[1]Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption, 1939–55* (Oxford, 2000), ch. 5; Amy Black, Stephen Brooke, "The Labour Party, Women and the Problem of Gender, 1951–66," *Journal of British Studies* 36 (1997): 450. Richard Findley, "The Conservative Party and Defeat: the Significance of Resale Price Maintenance for the General Election of 1964," *Twentieth Century British History* 12, 3 (2001): 327–53. See also Lawrence Black, *The Political Culture of the Left in Affluent Britain, 1951–64: Old Labour, New Britain?* (New York, 2003). Nick Tiratsoo, "Popular Politics, affluence and the Labour Party in the 1950s," in *Contemporary British History 1931–61*, eds. A. Gorst, L. Johnmann, W. Scott Lucas (London, 1991).

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ern citizenship and the configuration of private and public spheres. Hilton argues CA posed little challenge to the free market, but fashioned a critical private consumerism that served as a critique of the public economic sphere, foreshadowing modern ethical and anti-globalization agendas. This article contests Hilton's conclusions by focusing more on CA's ethos and broad audience than on its ideology and activist milieu.[2]

The settlement of the Cold War has also generated interest—since consumerism has a claim to being its ideological victor.[3] The language of consumerism seems pervasive—whether "we are all consumers now"; buy Klein's *No Logo* thesis; or perceive policy and politics to be suffused by marketing / focus groups. While not being a consumers' republic, even with consumer society flourishing (after its wartime abeyance), was Britain still more a nation of shoppers than shopkeepers?[4]

Although as conceived by CA and its magazine *Which?*, "consumerism" meant the consumer movement and protection rather than an activity and identity loaded with symbolic, political meaning or psychological associations.[5] This hints at why, excepting Hilton, CA's impact has scarcely been conveyed in studies like John Benson's or Frank Mort's. Historical studies have focused more on the social impact of consumerism on leisure and lifestyle, on identities (particularly gender) and its cultural meaning—and less on organizational expressions of consumerism as a movement.[6] CA bridges these themes, but illus-

[2]Matthew Hilton, "Consumer Politics in Post-War Britain," in *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*, eds. Martin Daunton, Matthew Hilton (Oxford, 2001), and Matthew Hilton, "The Fable of the Sheep, or, Private Virtues, Public Vices: The Consumer Revolution of the Twentieth Century," *Past and Present* 176, 1 (2002).

[3]See Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century* (New York, 2000), p. 1.

[4]For an overview, Daunton, Hilton, "Material Politics: An Introduction," in *Politics of Consumption*. Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York, 1999); Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto, 1999) a study of Canada; Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2002); Thomas Hine, *I Want That! How We All Became Shoppers* (New York, 2002). David Osler, *Labour Party plc* (Edinburgh, 2002). I greatly benefitted from an advance read of Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge, 2003).

[5]See R.Swagler, "Evolution and Application of the term consumerism: themes and variations," *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 28, 2 (1994); Rosemary Scott, *The Female Consumer* (London, 1976), pt. II.

[6]John Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880–1980* (London, 1994), p. 234. Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1996).

trates others too. CA's scale alone makes it crucial to understanding consumerism in Britain after the 1950s. It was potent in representing Britain as an affluent society. CA's growth contrasts with Labour's apparent difficulties with affluence and the falling membership (from an early 1950s peak) of both main parties. Arguably, CA was articulating a consumer "interest" more effectively than both. This is a familiar enough thesis about post-war Britain—of the diversification of social identities, dissipation of class politics, and proliferation of single-issue pressure groups.[7] In CA's case it has much to recommend it—occupying the energies of Peter Goldman and Michael Young (CA's guiding spirit), chief authors of the victorious Labour and Conservative manifestos in the 1945 and 1959 elections respectively. Both were vital backroom party brains, lured into CA's orbit. CA is a useful test of this thesis, but it would ill-behoove its history to reduce it to political terms. Traditions of social thought and ideas of consumer policy were as relevant. CA was not a political party, nor understandable in exclusively consumerist terms—its influences were wider and ambitions loftier. It was negotiating consumerism's public, private, and political borders and meaning—indeed the scope of "the political" itself was being re-defined. CA viewed affluence in quite specific ways. Any wider social changes read off CA have to be mediated by an understanding of *Which?*craft, CA's practice and ethos, which this article explores.

I

Like Sputnik, *Which?* was launched in October 1957. Its rise seemed as rapid and was longer-lasting. It claimed by its second edition to have "probably...more readers than any other quarterly in the country, perhaps even in the world." 50,000 members after six months made CA the fastest growing voluntary association in Britain since the war. Its 100,000th member—characteristically a Mrs. Harrison from Oxford, rewarded with a trip to an electrical testing laboratory—was achieved before the end of 1958. Local consumer groups, started-up in 1961 under CA's auspices, numbered almost 100 by 1965.[8] The International Organization of Consumer Unions (IOCU) for which Michael Young fund-raised from organizations like the Ford Foundation, was founded at The Hague in 1960. It had member organizations in twenty-seven counties by the end of the 1960s—many of which received start-up donations from CA.[9]

[7]See recently, Adam Lent, *British Social Movements since 1945: Sex, Colour, Peace and Power* (Basingstoke, 2001); Wyn Grant, *Pressure Groups and British Politics* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 214–15.

[8]*Which?* (Winter 1958): 3; (Spring 1958): 3; (Winter 1959): 35. *Which?* went monthly in April 1959. Christina Fulop, *The Consumer Movement and the Consumer* (London, 1977), p. 38.

[9]CA Council minutes (20 January 1959), Consumers' Association Archive, London (hereafter cited as CAA). Foo Gaik Sim, *IOCU on the Record: A Documentary History of the International Or-*

CA's own take-off was funded by a grant from the progressive Elmhirst Trust—backers of Young's *alma mater*, Dartington Hall. Dorothy Elmhirst had previously made grants to the prototype consumer organization, the American Consumers Union (CU), formed in 1936. A $6,000 donation from CU further aided CA and close links were sustained with CU. Dorothy Goodman, an American in London and CA founder, later became an associate editor of CU's monthly, *Consumer Reports*.[10] On the basis of CU's record, pollster Mark Abrams predicted a membership ceiling of 250,000—which CA topped by the end of 1959. By 1969 CA's expenditure and income exceeded £1 million and its membership, 600,000. Five start-up staff had become more than 300 by 1970. Its first home—a story CA often related, and reminiscent of the Co-Op's origins in a Rochdale back-street—a decrepit shed in Bethnal Green, soon was left for offices in High Holborn in 1960 and later in Westminster.[11]

Which? undertook what it was fond of describing as "honest fact-finding"—empirical, comparative research into the functional worth of consumer durables. "CA's concern is with the design of goods from the point of view of their efficiency, their convenience and their safety, in relation to their price," *Which?* editor Eirlys Roberts explained in 1966. Ethical issues were not uppermost in CA's mind—indeed it admitted testing hair color restorers on mice in 1960.[12]

The "I'm Backing Britain" campaign, which fleetingly flowered as Britain's economy and balance of payments nose-dived in 1967, excited little support. CA was all for aiding the British economy, but by improving quality and value not consumer autarky. It held little truck with buying a product because of national origins. The first edition of *Motoring Which?* in January 1962 criticized all six British cars it tested (its British Motor Corporation (BMC) Mini had to be replaced), finding most favor in a Volkswagen. The *Daily Express*'s chief motoring correspondent, Basil Cardew seethed: "so-called consumer associations devote their time to harsh criticism of British goods"; such reports "were gleefully seized upon by our foreign competitors" and accused CA members of

ganisation of Consumer Unions (Yonkers, 1990). *The Consumer Movement: Lectures by Colston E. Warne*, ed. Richard Morse (Manhattan, Kan. 1993), p. 200. In Consumers' Movement Archive, Kansas State University.

[10]Hans B.Thorelli, Sarah V. Thorelli, *Consumer Information Handbook: Europe and North America* (New York, 1974), p. 19. Elmhirst also donated to CU's forerunner, Consumers' Research, Morse, *Consumer Movement*, pp. 27, 61.

[11]Abrams in Casper Brook, "The Discriminating Consumer," paper to British Institute of Management 14th Annual Conference (November 1959), p. 15, CAA A27. CA, *Twelfth Annual Report of the Consumers' Association* (1969), pp. 4, 11. *Which? and Consumers' Association* (London, 1965), p. 5.

[12]Eirlys Roberts, "CA's part in the design of Products" (29 June 1966), CAA A27. *Which?* (September 1960): 205.

"paying to support a campaign against British exports, British industry and British employment." CA director Casper Brook was keen to pursue a libel case against the *Express*.[13]

Anxious to quash any notion that it was anti-British, CA was a quiet pro-European. "CA as a body has no view on the common market," it declared during Britain's first application in 1962. When Young told the *Daily Mail* in the same year that Europe meant that "after contracting for so long, our immediate world may begin to enlarge," he was referring to the loss of empire, but this also applied to his consumerist vision for reversing Britain's decline.[14] Young attended (as an observer) a meeting of consumer representatives from the six members in Brussels in 1961 and his 1960 polemic, *The Chipped White Cups of Dover*, was firmly pro-European.[15]

Nor were style, fashion or aesthetics CA's metier—it avoided recommending "best buys" in such instances. "We can say that an electric iron is safe or a refrigerator efficient because we have tested it," a 1959 *Which?* editorial detailed, "we cannot say that the iron looks good or that the refrigerator looks ugly." CA was "not concerned with appearances," but ergonomics were of interest and it endorsed the London Design Centre set up in 1956 by the Council for Industrial Design. Roberts often sat on its judging panels as "a critic who would not be seduced by prettiness for prettiness' sake."[16]

CA could hardly avoid inferring on taste and lifestyle or expressing cultural preferences—often by what was not said or tested, but also because its anxiety that enjoyment of affluence should not become arrant materialism and should be improved through better goods and buyers, could err towards the puritan or ascetic. An early *Which?* edition on "Drying the family wash" concluded the "best method" was "a country garden, a stiff breeze and a sunny day." Not terrifically useful advice to residents of "Coronation Street" or high-rise housing or rainy Britain! It is hard to envision the "swinging sixties" from the pages of *Which?* or CA's sober discussions, but this might refurbish our impression of affluence and moderate the more sizzling accounts of the 1960s.[17]

[13] *Daily Express* (12 and 14 April 1962). Legal advice from Neville Faulks Q.C. and Brook's memo in CA Council Minutes (14 May 1962). *Daily Mirror* ("They take the small British car for a ride"—11 January 1962) also argued *Which?* was unfair to British cars, see M. Healy, "Reactions to the Car Supplement" CA Council minutes (12 February 1962).

[14] CA Council minutes (15 October 1962). Young, *Daily Mail* (23 November 1962).

[15] *Which?* (August 1961): 206. Michael Young, *The Chipped White Cups of Dover—a discussion of the possibility of a new progressive party* (London, 1960), pp. 5, 11.

[16] "CA News," *Which?* (July 1959): 63. CA helped establish a Centre for Consumer Ergonomics at Loughborough University in 1970. "The Taste-makers," *Sunday Times* (25 May 1963).

[17] *Which?* (August 1959): 99. Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States* c. *1958–c.1974* (Oxford, 1998).

Tests of "Pep" pills (at Tony Crosland's behest) and contraceptives (in 1963), suggest CA was alive to contemporary issues in the "permissive society." But the latter was available only as a special supplement and researched despite the unease of Catholic staff. CA understood affluence to have given rise to greater expectations and potential for an improved quality of life, but was no guarantor of this. More cars meant congestion, even more food—as evinced in *Which?*'s tests on slimming methods—required managing. CA retained an admiration for the self-control subsistence enforced and abundance threatened—"don't eat between meals" potential dieters were told.[18] That the *Good Food Guide*, founded by socialist gourmet Raymond Postgate in 1951, was published in conjunction with CA from 1963, tempers an unduly bland picture of CA. But areas like youth culture, despite Abrams' estimate that *The Teenage Consumer* accounted for some six percent of consumer spending, were notably absent from *Which?*[19]

Like (though not only due to) Labour revisionism—Sweden and the U.S.A. were reference points for CA. As Peter Goldman saw it, CA's ethos exhibited a little of both "the socialistic Swedes" and CU's "cold war against salesmanship." Swedish product labeling was a favored model of CA's research spin-off, the Research Institute for Consumer Affairs (RICA). American consumer campaigner Ralph Nader, who struck fame with his 1965 indictment of car safety, *Unsafe at any Speed*, was regularly cross-referenced in debates about motoring safety. But there was no British Nader—CA operated incrementally not militantly like Nader's corporate raiders. Such functionalism was also at odds with the Swedish Institute for Consumer Research. Founded by wartime women's organizations and state run from 1957, the Institute subscribed to a national slogan of "more beautiful things for everyday use."[20]

CA's utilitarian style also contrasted with the Labour revisionist emphasis on the quality of life besides standard of living. For Crosland, affluence required the Webbs' and Fabian emphasis on efficiency to yield to a more relaxed, pluralism—full enjoyment besides employment, aestheticism not asceticism. So, too, the free-market Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), which felt, "with rising standards, leisure counts for more and the marginal utility of not bothering about

[18]*Which?* (Autumn 1958) and "Slimming Foods" (June 1961): 136–39.

[19]CA council minutes (14 February 1962); *Which?* (November 1962). CA, *Contraceptives* (London, 1963). Transcript of interview with Roberts, p.21. CAA A26. *Good Food Guide* (1963–64): vi. Mark Abrams, *The Teenage Consumer* (London, 1959), pp. 7–9.

[20]Peter Goldman, "Consumerism—Art or Science?" *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* (August 1969): 3. RICA, *Informative Labelling: The Swedish System* (London, 1963). Barbara Castle (Transport Minister 1965–68, who introduced seat belts, breathalysers, and speed limits) on Nader, *Focus* (September 1966): 18. Ralph Nader, *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-in Dangers of the American Automobile* (New York, 1965). "Consumer Research in Sweden," *Which?* (Autumn 1957): 31. For Canadian parallels, Parr, *Domestic Goods*, ch. 4.

marginal utility grows"[21] Yet CA was invariably bothered about precisely the marginal utility of this or that washing machine. This pertained to consumerism, as Marghanita Laski (Harold Laski's niece and prominent consumer journalist) pointed out in 1958:

> one can envisage a situation when the shopper, thoroughly informed as to what is efficient, economical, labour-saving and useful, buys it and is sad, simply because the one thing she doesn't like about it is the way it looks. And we shall have got our values miserably wrong if we fail to weigh the pleasures of the senses against reason and don't occasionally reject what is efficient, economical, labour-saving and useful and ugly for what has far less of these good qualities but is still a pleasure to taste and touch and smell and see.

Perhaps this was why Laski was reluctant to join CA.[22] For despite its revisionist influences, CA could not and would not speak to this issue. Asa Briggs relates Young's dynamism as a social researcher to the Webbs—there was more than a whiff of Fabianism in CA's dislike of the waste it saw in advertising and its anti-frivolous, puritan instincts. Beatrice Webb's *The Discovery of the Consumer* (1928) was often cited as a starting point for understanding modern consumerism.[23]

Which? prided itself on no-nonsense language—"*Which?* English"—illuminating the false claims and opaque rhetoric of advertising. It was a rare moment of effusion when CA declared an intellectual debt "simultaneously to Adam Smith and Tom Paine." It aimed to "enlighten the ignorant" and "wither the establishment by questioning the value of the goods and services it provided," all "in the name of the rights of man" and the belief that consumption was the essence of economic activity.[24] But CA was apt to prolix vindications of its methods and activities. This was apparent to *Which?* readers, who complained it was "too long-winded" and should "come to the point." Crosland remembered the governing CA council "was not the most taciturn council" and would read the *Evening Standard* "when proceedings bored him."[25]

Crosland was not CA's "best buy" revisionist. That had been Denis Healey, who (like Wilfred Fienburgh, another revisionist and temporary CA office man-

[21]"Consumer Research in Sweden," *Which?* (Autumn 1957): 31. C. A. R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London, 1956). J. K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (London, 1958). R. Harris, A. Seldon, *Advertising and the Public* (London, 1959), p. 226.

[22] *Shopper's Guide* (Spring 1958). CA council minutes (28 October 1956, 17 November 1957). Laski donated £500 to CA's start-up.

[23]Asa Briggs, *Michael Young: Social Entrepreneur* (Basingstoke, 2001). Jeremy Mitchell, "The Consumer Movement and Technological Change," *International Social Science Journal* 25, 3 (1973): 358.

[24]"The How and Why of *Which?*," *Domestic Equipment Trader* (January 1964): 31. Paul Fletcher, "When we were very young," *Which?* (October 1967): 290–91.

[25]CA Marketing Division, "Results of Monthly Omnibus Questionnaires" (January 1971), p. 66. CAA A11. Crosland in "Proceedings of Consumer Assembly," London (3 November 1967), p. 18. CAA A67. Eirlys Roberts, *Which? 25: Consumers' Association 1957–82* (London, 1982), p. 59.

ager) harked back to Young's days in Labour headquarters at Transport House. Healey was as forthright as Crosland, but less louche, more sober. Otherwise Crosland was an obvious choice, with knowledge of consumer issues acquired as secretary until 1958 of the Gaitskell Commission surveying the Co-operative movement.[26]

In part, CA attracted and fashioned a similarly stern audience. Amongst criticisms of *Which?* that emerged from a 1962 survey were: "the use of English in *Which?* is becoming Americanised e.g. pack instead of package"; "the use of colour...is a concession to glamour" and "some reports are frivolous e.g. electric socks." One member wrote to complain at the occasional "comic drawings."[27] This earnestness was evident in CU's *Consumer Reports* too, where "record reviews" dealt with classical music only.[28] Even where popular pastimes were assessed, *Which?*'s sobriety was present. A test on beer noted "some of our members must be teetotalers by conviction." CA admitted that fashion, tradition and habit shaped drinking preferences and since "tastes differ" abstained from naming a "best buy." Newspaper flat season racing predictions were appraised from 1947–59. The *Daily Telegraph* and *Express* tipsters were applauded for some seasons in the black, but it was concluded that "anyone who enjoys racing and betting is obviously prepared to pay for it."[29]

Hire-purchase schemes, personal taxation, and consumer law also fell within CA's remit. Local and legislative campaigning evolved to supplement testing. CA was one of several voluntary, regulatory bodies, like the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), attendant upon affluence. It regularly submitted to Government enquiries and claimed influence in the appointment of the 1959 Molony Committee on Consumer Protection and legislation thereafter. By 1980 *The Times* reckoned CA had "filled more pages of the statute book than any other pressure group this century."[30]

[26]CA Council minutes (17 November 1957, 13 February 1958).

[27]Josephine Clifford-Smith (Membership secretary), "Inquiries by CA members and the public" (2 January 1962) in CA Council minutes (8 January 1962). Draft for New Society, "Who Reads *Which?*" (26 October 1962), p.1 CAA A27.

[28]See CU's collection, *Consumers Union reviews classical recordings* (Indianapolis, 1973) and Susie McKellar, " 'The Beauty of Stark Utility': rational consumption in America—Consumer Reports 1936–54," in *Utility Reassessed: The Role of Ethics in the Practice of Design* ed., Judy Attfield (New York, 1999).

[29]"Beer," *Which?* (August 1960): 167–69. "Racing Correspondents," *Which?* (March 1960): 60–61.

[30]"Hire Purchase Enquiry"; Douglas Houghton, MP (General Secretary, Inland Revenue Staff Federation), "How to Reduce your Income Tax," *Which?* (Spring 1958). David Tench *The Law for Consumers* (London, 1962), H. Cole, A. Diamond, *The Consumer and the Law* (Manchester, 1960). *The Times* (10 April 1980).

CA figures were rapidly assimilated into policy-making circles. The first chair of the Consumers' Council, the regulatory authority and information service created by the Conservatives after Molony reported in 1963, was Baroness Elliot of Harwood, an ex-CA vice president, who remained an honorary vice president of RICA. Under Harold Wilson, Young chaired the Social Science Research Council and later the National Consumer Council (NCC) created in 1975. Jeremy Mitchell, *Which?*'s deputy research director between 1958 and 1962, joined the new National Economic Development Office in Millbank Tower in 1965.[31]

But CA took neither government money nor advertisements, fearing its test verdicts would be perceived as lacking independence. CA discouraged manufacturers citing *Which?* in adverts and referred the issue to the ASA in 1965 when (in an endorsement of the power of *Which?*'s trademark "best buy") ninety-seven cases were detected.[32] It was, like many critics of the affluent society, skeptical of advertising. Evidence was submitted to Labour's Advertising Enquiry in 1962. In 1968 Eirlys Roberts fumed against Unilever and Proctor and Gamble—the £60 million expended advertising washing detergents could have built 20,000 new homes—and highlighted a 1966 Monopolies Commission report requiring both companies to reduce their advertising (and thereby prices) since the total sales of washing detergent had not grown since 1956.[33]

Critics, like the IEA, charged CA was anti-advertising. Another business lobby, Aims of Industry, read Eirlys Roberts' Consumers and its discussion of consumerism's "egalitarian motive," as a form of "practical anti-capitalism." A favorite accusation was that CA's promotional spending was (proportionally) "unmatched, so far as one can ascertain, in the world of commerce," compared to its professed *raison d'ètre*, testing and research. CA found the nub of the charge hard to refute.[34] In 1961–62 research expenditure increased by fifty-two percent and advertising by 230 percent; in 1967–68 research exceeded promotional spending by less than 1.5 percent.[35] Its defense was that *Which?* was not available at newsagents and whilst "some people subscribe on recommendations

[31] *Which?* (October 1965): 287. Mitchell was later SSRC secretary and National Consumer Council director.

[32] "*Which?* and Advertisers," *Which?* (March 1966): 67.

[33] "Eirlys Roberts Writes," *Which?* (June 1968): 163. CA, Sixth Annual Report (1962-63), p.14. Labour Party, *Report of a Commission of Enquiry into Advertising* (London, 1966), p. 201.

[34] Elisabeth Houlton, *Which? Put to the Test* (Aims of Industry Study No. 15, 1967), pp. 3, 12. Eirlys Roberts, *Consumers* (London, 1966). Thorelli and Thorelli, *Consumer Information Handbook*, p. 18, estimates for 1971 that 28% of CA's income went to promotion and 23% to research and testing. R. Dunstan, "*Which?* Hunt," *Twentieth Century* 176, 4–77, 1 (1968–69): 14.

[35] "Accounts for 1961/62," CA council minutes (4 June 1962). CA, *Fifth Annual Report* (1961-62), p. 3, showed more was spent on producing and distributing *Which?* through 1960–62 than on testing. *Twelfth Annual Report* (1968-69), p. 11.

from friends...the great majority of new members only join as a result of our advertising." In 1961–62, press adverts yielded 42,660 new members compared to 1,924 recruited from inserts in other publications and 518 from direct mail.[36]

CA was adept at self-marketing. Advertising paid, CA's example would seem to evince, and even successful products like *Which?* needed promotion. Attracting media attention was a skill CA learned early. Its launch received extensive press coverage. [37] It featured in *Punch* cartoons and on TV's *That was the Week that Was*. Although it was less clear in the latter case whether TW3's report on religion—"handy little faith...if you want transubstantiation you can have it, if you don't you don't have to"—was satirizing religion or *Which?*'s earnest style.[38] *Motoring Which?*'s launch in 1962 saw Eirlys Roberts interviewed on ITV news and car project officer, (the aptly named) Maurice Healy, on BBC Midland TV and radio news. There was wide mainstream press and motoring journal interest—if not always positive or concerned to defend its own corner in the case of *Motor*, the market leader.[39]

Impressions mattered to CA. It was chary of this in others (particularly business), but took its own profile seriously. Professional designer (for Gala Toys and CND) Ken Garland was employed to re-design *Which?* in 1962.[40] It already used more glossy paper and photos than the dowdy, part-government funded Consumer Advisory Council's *Shopper's Guide*—*Which?*'s chief competitor to 1963. *Shopper's Guide* was revamped by Clive Labovitch and Michael Heseltine's Cornmarket Press in 1962. A CA Christmas song showed CA felt the advertising needs of Cornmarket's other magazines, *Topic* and *Town* would compromise test reports and some light-hearted anxiety: "competition's stiff for *Which?*—with Heseltine and Labovitch." With falling sales *Shopper's Guide* was folded by Cornmarket. CA abetted by offering its subscribers *Which?* as an alternative.[41]

[36]CA, "Notes for CA speakers" (September 1970), p. 11. CAA A65. "Membership Promotion," pp. 11–12. CA Council Minutes (4 June 1962, 14 May 1962—Legal advice from Neville Faulks, Q.C.).

[37]Stanley Alderson, "Buy the Improved *Which?*," *The Manager* (July/August 1959): 472–73. "The Press Greets CR," *Which?* (Winter 1958): 20.

[38]Bernard Levin, *The Pendulum Years: Britain and the Sixties* (London, 1970), p. 321.

[39]Healy, "Reactions to the Car Supplement," CA Council minutes (12 February 1962).

[40]"Which? Layout and Design," CA Council minutes (14 May 1962)

[41]Funding came via the Women's Advisory Committee of the British Standards Institution. Song in Transcript of interview with Joan Meier, pp. 172–73 CAA A13: "Can't you see them arguing—When the first lab report comes in?—If brand 'A' comes out too bad—Topic and Town might lose that ad." On relations with *Shopper's Guide* and *Cornmarket*, Joan Meier to Brook (9 January 1963) and discussion documents, CAA A27. Sarah Franks, "Selling Consumer Protection: Competitive Strategies of the Consumers' Association, 1957 to 1990" (M. Phil. diss., University of Oxford, 2000), pp. 35–46.

In Sarah Franks' model, CA's chief skill was in eking out, expanding, and dominating the consumer information market. But this booming market was as characterized by curios as competitiveness. Romance publishers Mills and Boon issued a shopping guide in 1961. Elizabeth Gundrey, *Shopper's Guide's editor, was the most prolific presence. Laski contributed consumer opinions to the Observer* from the mid-1950s. Besides *Which?* and *Shopper's Guide*, 1957 also saw a "Consuming Interest" column start up in the Conservative weekly *The Spectator*, followed by a "Value Judgment" column in the *New Statesman* and "Information" in *The Listener*. From 1951 *The Consumer* intermittently emitted from a free trade, anti-rationing group, the Cheap Food League, aping Cobden's nineteenth-century anti-corn law politics.[42]

II

Characteristic of CA's marketing savvy was its use of opinion polling: to represent and target its members and, by dint of the issues raised, to define them and fashion "consumer opinion." Polls revealed the products members wanted tested (TVs, washing-machines, spin-driers, vacuums, and electric shavers topped the first poll, with twenty-five percent requesting washing detergents); their opinion on issues like RPM (a 1961 survey found three-quarters for its abolition, excepting certain goods) and their socio-economic status.[43]

The latter was middle class in the main—eighty-four percent of *Which?* subscribers owned a car in 1967, compared with forty-eight percent of all households; twenty-five percent earned upwards of £3,000 compared with two percent of the population. "The model *Which?* family," CA found in 1964, "takes the *Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Express* and *Reader's Digest*." It was middle-aged too—one third were aged thirty-six to forty-five, but only eleven percent under twenty-five and five percent over sicty-five. Even in lighter moments CA disclosed its middling sort and attitude towards humbler consumers. One member told: "I have just had a conversation with my char about detergents and asked if she had heard of *Which?* she said 'yes, she had seen it on the telly—and heard that it washed best of all.'"[44]

[42]Gilda Lund, *You and Your Shopping* (London, 1961). Notably, Elizabeth Gundrey, *Your Money's Worth: A Handbook for Consumers* (Harmondsworth: 1962). *The Consumer* (Summer 1956): 13–16. CAA A29.

[43] *Which?* (October 1959): 123. Public Attitude Surveys Report, "A Postal Survey conducted among subscribers to *Which?* magazine concerning attitude to resale price maintenance" (August 1961). CAA A14.

[44]CA, "Notes for CA speakers," p. 7. Gallup Poll, *Enquiry into Which?* (July 1962), p. 3b, CAA A31 reckoned members were three times as likely as Britons as a whole to be upper or middle class. Jeremy Mitchell, "Results of Questionnaire sent to members of the Consumers' Association in November 1964," pp. 12–13, 15. CAA A27. *Which?* (December 1959): 178.

Socially then, CA was something of a consumer aristocracy. CA's leaders thought this problematic. They aspired to the potential surmised by the *Pontypridd Observer*, that *Which?* "promises to benefit the ordinary man and woman." In September 1959 CA Council agreed "to broaden the CA into an organization for the purpose of representing the consumer at large." Casper Brook had urged the Council earlier in 1959 that as it was "part of our terms of reference to spread consumer information as widely as possible," it "ought to be favourably disposed towards the publishing of a popular *Which?*." Brook envisioned a *Which?* targeted not at its current clientele, "the higher social/economic groups—presumably those who least need to be discriminating in their shopping," but at what was described as "the less well-educated and much larger market."[45]

The subtext was clear: working-class shoppers needed to be more discerning in their consumption. Such paternalist criticism echoed the late-Victorian social surveys like Rowntree's, whose social empiricism CA (and Young in particular) emulated. Young's 1960 study of suburban London noted a vital difference was "that the working class do not know how to spend all their extra money...they have got a middle-class income without the ingrained middle-class sense of how to spend it." A consumer psychology study corroborated this, noting the relative sophistication and confidence of middle-class purchasing techniques.[46]

Other than local groups and discounted subscriptions for trade unionists, limited progress was made towards informing working-class buying habits. Crosland, though sympathetic to a popular *Which?*, felt in 1959 CA was "not professional enough yet" and should "consolidate." Conservative Phillip Goodhart was "horrified at the idea of a 'popular' *Which?*," though "thought...an 'Office *Which?*' a good idea." By 1962 Crosland was persuaded CA should have access to ITV to help it "reach a mass" rather than "mainly middle-class audience," attracted by its BBC program, *Choice*.[47]

CA strove to break down popular resistance, but the best Roberts could conclude in 1966 was that membership had begun "to spread, though slowly into the skilled working class." Later in the 1960s, Goldman's sensed there was "no point in knocking one's head against a brick wall" in terms of a more popular publication. CA should go to working-class consumers if they would not come

[45]"The Press Greets CR," p. 20. Paper "C" and CA council minutes (13 September 1959). C. Brook, "Where are we going?," p. 14, CA council minutes (2 February 1959).

[46]Peter Wilmott, Michael Young, *Family and Class in a London Suburb* (Harmondsworth, 1960), pp. 117–18. Emer Rodnight, "Attitudes to spending Money on Consumer Goods and Services: A Small-scale Psychological Survey" (February 1965), pp. 5, 9, 15, CAA A14.

[47]Clifford-Smith, "Inquiries." Discussion, Extraordinary Council meeting minutes (23 February 1959). C. A. R. Crosland, *The Conservative Enemy* (London, 1962), p. 65.

to *Which?* Besides reports in the *Daily Mirror*, Goldman's model was Austrian high street advice centers, cloned by CA in London from 1969.[48]

Which? for historians (not a niche directly catered for), offers insights into middle-class life, with guidance on tipping etiquette, airport customs, credit cards, and European au pairs, Richard Weight notes was a phenomenon whereby "the middle classes...could fill the worst gaps left by the withdrawal of the British working classes from domestic service."[49] A *Drugs and Therapeutics Bulletin* (another idea imported from CU) aimed to combat the medley of ads for remedies that were a feature of popular magazines (such that one "might conclude...that the British working-classes are congenitally both constipated and 'nervy,'" Hoggart noted). Laski's *Observer* column had drawn attention to the similarity of varieties of Aspirin. But most working-class shoppers, who invariably bought second-hand, had little use for *Which?*'s focus on new goods. By the later 1960s then, *Which?* was a mainstay of middle-class life. CA's Marketing Division reported the main reader interests in 1970 were home-centered activities—gardening or DIY, catered for from 1971 by *Handyman Which?*. And for those with alternatives to spending there was *Money Which?* from 1968.[50]

In attitude too, CA can be regarded as something of a consumers' aristocracy. It reveled in its member's reputation as "some of the...most rational people in the country" who were "more knowledgeable and articulate about consumer goods than the rest." CA members were typically well educated—one third had a terminal education age above nineteen, compared to seven percent of all Britons.[51] Social psychologist Peter Cooper's research in the *British Journal of Marketing*, positing three stages of consumer evolution, was seized upon. Cooper held modern housewives, due to the credit they could access and at the mercy of marketing (stage two), had lost the status they enjoyed and the buying skills and experience available in a large, extended family (stage one). Stage three would see housewives mature and "draw...on impartial information" of the sort offered by *Which?* to "make informed choices and take control of their budget." In short, *Which?* was helping "combat the alleged deterioration in housewifery

[48]Roberts, *Consumers*, p. 81. Goldman, "Art or Science?," pp. 4–5. Transcript of interview with Goldman, p. 10 CAA A26. Roberts, *Which? 25*, pp. 99–101.

[49]*Which?* (July 1961): 174–75; (July 1967): 209–14; (March 1968): 93 "Au Pair girls," *Which?* (January 1969): 19–21. Richard Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain 1940–2000* (London, 2002), p. 488.

[50]Roberts, *Which?25*, pp. 15, 45. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth, 1958), p. 97. "Results of Monthly Omnibus Questionnaires" (January 1971), p. 55.

[51]Rosemary McRobert (CA Deputy Director in the 1980s) in the Consumer Council's *Focus*, quoted in *Which?* (September 1966): 275, *Which?* (October 1966): 307. "Results of Monthly Omnibus Questionnaire" (January 1971), p. 4.

standards." This placed it in a long tradition of middle-class attempts at educating working-class housewifery. [52]

At the same time as purporting its members were the "most consumer-conscious," CA presented itself as a "bewildered buyers club." In imagining the consumer, CA supposed that while affluence had extended choice it had also complicated issues for consumers. As Goldman explained, the advent of mass production, distribution, credit and marketing, together with the technical goods "which the Merlins of the laboratory have conjured into existence," meant "the position of the consumer, though improving...in absolute terms, was actually worsening relative to that of the trader." This then was a *Which?* to counter the hocus-pocus of the market and wizardry of technology, and an antidote to the spell the market seemed to have cast over Britons. If still a "David" compared to the "Goliath" £360 million spent a year on advertising by industry, CA's target was to tilt the market's imbalance in consumer's favor. [53]

It was not only that consumers were pressurized by advertising, bewitched by choice, or mystified by technology, but that they lacked the prudence (and not only requisite information) to make informed choices. CA often took a dim view of consumers. As Roberts recalled in 1982:

> Remember (or imagine) your fellow-countrymen as they were in the early 1950s...believing that society could be made much fairer....The shops were full of goods, many...new and exciting...washing machines, television sets...synthetic textiles unknown before the war. No-one, however intelligent, was much good at shopping...people...felt puzzled, unconfident and even resentful. They felt they were at the mercy of manufacturers and advertisers who...were well able to take the general public—who knew nothing—for whatever ride they chose. [54]

Fabian faith in professional expertise also tied in here—a 1958 Fabian title, *Efficiency and the Consumer*, was critical of consumers' lack of skills. That this related to traditions of cultural thought critical of mass society and of the masses lack of discrimination and taste, epitomized by F. R. Leavis' *Scrutiny* was suggested by the pilot (or dummy) of the BBC's CA-inspired *Choice* being dubbed "scrutiny program." CA was hardly alone amongst consumerists in imagining consumers thus. Gundrey's 1967 book, *Help* worried "more than half the time the bewildered citizen does not know...aids exist—or where to locate them" and

[52]*Which?* (January 1969): 3.

[53]Brook, "300,000 bewildered buyers club together," *Sunday Citizen* (23 June 1963). Goldman, "Art or Science?," p. 5. Eirlys Roberts, "David and Goliath," *Observer* (9 June 1963).

[54]Roberts, *Which? 25*, pp. 8–9. Disparaging tendencies remained—1980s CEO Shelia Mckecknie told CA staff that 40% of new shareholders receiving dividend checks from the British Gas privatization, thought they were bills and tried to pay them. Correspondence, ex-CA employee (7 January 2001).

"flounders helplessly at the mercy of Government departments, departments, big business." [55]

The perception of consumers' abilities—whether they were sovereign (as in liberal economic theory) or corralled by business (as the left sensed)—was key to the politics of providing protection or education. CA believed consumers required both enlightenment and protection; had rights but also responsibilities; were entitled to protection from the state but should not rely upon it. Too much protection might indeed limit the potential for making discerning shoppers. A quality label was only as useful as its reader or as the editorial in the draft of *Which?* put it, "an ounce of self-help is worth a ton of spoon-feeding." One "lady customer buying toothpaste" amused *Which?* and was reported under the by-line "the hidden terrors of labelling," when she asked, "What is this 'c.c.' stuff they're putting in toothpaste these days...it tastes awful."[56] The *Yorkshire Gazette* noted at CA's foundation that, "if prizes were given for intelligent shopping we British would be at the bottom of the league" and that CA had been set up "to act as a watchdog."[57] Journalist Robert Millar's anatomy of consumers—commissioned by CA under the title *The Discriminating Consumer*, but disowned when it emerged critical of them entitled *The Affluent Sheep*—only reinforced CA's watchdog (or sheepdog) tendencies and determination.[58]

Published in 1963, Millar's study asked "can consumers meet the challenge set by the growth of affluence?" Was "the affluent society...to be a servant or a master?" It concluded: "because of their own apathy, carelessness and irresponsibility, consumers are in danger of losing the war." Further bad news for CA came in Millar's finding that some working-class shoppers thought *Which?* was "in the pay of advertisers and manufacturers," only for middle-class use and produced by "do-gooders."[59]

Even CA's members complained it was too prone to imagine that in the case of consumerism *Which?* knew better what was good for the consumer than consumers themselves. Just under half told the 1968 readers' survey that they found CA "sometimes a bit smug about its own activities." The 1971 survey similarly unearthed a sense that "reports are written with a self-righteous 'know-

[55]Hilton, "Fable of the Sheep." CA Council Minutes (8 February 1960). Colin Harbury, *Efficiency and the Consumer* (London, 1958). Elizabeth Gundrey, *Help* (London, 1967), p. 5. See also Parr, *Domestic Goods*, p. 96.

[56]"Consumer Bulletin" (July 1956), p. 1. CAA A27. *Which?* (December 1966): 371.

[57]"The Press Greets CR," *Which?* (Winter 1958): 20.

[58]The study's progress can be traced in CA council minutes. Brook "Where are we going?" (2 February 1959) reported it "well in hand"; (8 February 1960) saw CA try to "dissuade" Millar; but by (14 March 1960) it was assumed Millar would publish it on his own.

[59]Robert Millar, *The Affluent Sheep* (London, 1963), pp. 194–96.

all' air" or were "too cocky, the consumer should be predominant, not the Consumers' Association."[60]

Women were central to CA's vision of consumers; particularly as housewives, with affluence perceived to have primarily impacted the private-domestic sphere. 1957's Festival of Women was *Which?*'s planned launch pad—"the precise section of the community to whom we wish to appeal." In looking for test participants, CA wanted "practical men householders." In women it sought the "practising housewife" and "sensible women...methodical, not too imaginative." Women were considered particularly prone to manipulation in the modern marketplace—front covers of *Which?* typically showed white-coated male testers or women shoppers confusedly gazing at an array of products.[61]

Which?'s take on consumption patterns were then warped by variables of gender and class—rendering this evidence of CA's outlook above all else. More than reflecting consumption trends, CA's interest in household, domestic appliances (washing machines, detergents, TVs and refrigerators—although also cars, toys, photography equipment and insurance—were most tested by *Which?* to 1966) was freighting such durables as symbols of affluence. These actually constituted a small part of consumer spending, smaller still than the falling proportion of rising incomes spent on food.[62] Though this interest in washing machines also echoed the desire to improve working-class consumption and housewifery.[63]

Other evidence queried *Which?*'s assumption that women constituted its primary market. A 1966 Marplan survey of CA joiners found it was most often husbands who sent in a subscription slip. Nor was *Which?* inattentive to trends in male consumption. "Seven years ago the idea was anathema," a 1961 test on shaving lotion noted, but sales had increased tenfold between 1958 and 1960.[64] By the later 1960s, feminist commentators were noting how women's consumption was eroding traditionally male markets in alcohol, cigarettes, cars, and DIY.

[60]"Results of Monthly Omnibus Questionnaires" (January 1971), p. 66. *Which?* (April 1968): 128.

[61]Young, *Chipped White Cups*, p. 10. "Draft programme for First half Year," in ABC committee minutes (28 October 1956). Casper Brook, "Research Routine," p. 9 in CA Council minutes (25 June 1958). See the covers of the 1st, 2nd, and 4th editions of *Which?*.

[62]"Cumulative Index, 1957–66," *Which?* (December 1966): 398–400. Jim Tomlinson, "Economic growth, economic decline," in *The British Isles since 1945*, ed. Kathleen Burk (Oxford, 2003), pp. 80–81.

[63]See Sue Bowden, Avner Offer, "Household appliances and the Use of Time: The United States and Britain since the 1920s," *Economic History Review* 47 (1994); Christine Zmroczek, "Dirty Linen: Women, Class and Washing Machines, 1920–1960s," *Women's Studies International Forum* 15 (1992).

[64]Marplan, R. 5226 "Why People Join Consumers Association" (September 1966), p.9. CAA A14. *Which?* (August 1961): 207.

And, as Hilton has argued, the consumer was represented in more middle-class and gender-neutral terms by this period.[65]

As salient as any particular constituency was the breadth of appeal CA aspired to achieve. Testimony to this can be found in CA's 150 speaking engagements in the six months after October 1961. These ranged from the British Disinfectant Manufacturers Association to the Institute of Contemporary Art. Although home counties' Women's Institutes, Townswomen's Guilds, and homemaking evening classes preponderated. Politically, Tories were keenest, with Young Conservatives in Hounslow, Epsom, Esher, Surbiton, Sevenoakes, Woodside Park, Lower Mitcham, Woodford, St. George's, Walton, and Barkingside addressed by CA, but only two Labour meetings and one Liberal.[66]

Gender remained a touchy button for consumer writers. Poet Philip Larkin unabashedly gendered *Which?*.[67] *The Spectator*'s "Consuming Interest" column was penned by "Leslie Adrian," an "apparently hermaphroditic" figure, whose gender excited debate. Adrian also demonstrated Conservative difficulties over RPM. In criticizing it (counter to many manufacturers), Adrian had to resort to the Liberal Party journal *New Outlook*. Contributors, from *Spectator* deputy editor Bernard Levin to freelancers, nurtured Adrian's ambiguity. Not least, as anonymity guarded the writer from personal liability against manufacturers complaints and libel action.[68]

CA certainly attracted critics of this sort. *Which?* sent "cold shudders up and down the spine" of the retail journal, *The Grocer*. An electrical retailer described CA as "self-appointed reformers...well-meaning, but...making much ado about nothing."[69] The Federation of British Industry (FBI) extended a tepid welcome. It complained to the BBC about *Choice*, broadcast from 1962 and based on *Which?* and *Shopper's Guide* reports. Their case was that while readers of these publications were "in the main a reasonably sophisticated group" who would "not therefore accept the conclusions of the reports uncritically," the mass TV audience was not so discerning. Carrying "the tremendous authority of the BBC" and "the personal prestige of Mr. Richard Dimbleby" (the presenter and BBC's

[65]Scott, *Female Consumer*, pp. 159–67. Matthew Hilton, "The Female Consumer and the Politics of Consumption in Twentieth-Century Britain," *Historical Journal* 45, 1 (2002).

[66]"Speaking engagements met by CA" (Oct. 1961—Mar. 1962), CA Council minutes (14 May 1962).

[67]"Over to catch the drivel of some bitch—who's read nothing but Which" in "Vers de Société," Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London, 1988), p. 181.

[68]Andrew Robertson, "The Campaigners," *Twentieth Century* 176, 4 - 177, 1 (1968–69): 10–11. Leslie Adrian, *Consuming Interest, from* The Spectator (London, 1961), and "RPM is the Shopper's Enemy," *New Outlook: A Liberal Magazine* 21 (July 1963).

[69]"The Press Greets CR," *Which?* (Winter 1958): 20–21.

chief political and royal commentator), the FBI feared the program's "recommendations and condemnations" were too likely to be "accepted uncritically." As "the nature of the television medium is such that most viewers are likely only to memorize the names of products which are either highly commended or severely criticized" and that some brands were not tested, the FBI president expressed "grave misgivings about the effects of this programme."[70]

Other criticisms were that in testing goods, CA enjoyed the sort of monopoly it deplored elsewhere and tested the public sector—rail, health, utilities—less than the private sector. It was alleged to inhibit entrepreneurial spirit—one manufacturer supposed subjecting early cars to *Which?*'s scrutiny might have stalled further development. *Motoring Which?* prompted one motor trade journal to suggest readers "might now be tempted to buy a bicycle."[71] The "best buy" concept, that helped make *Which?* more user-friendly than *Shopper's Guide*, also riled manufacturers, but was not that widely used. Only forty-seven percent of *Which?*'s 1963 reports cited a "best buy."[72]

Mention of CA to Sir Harry Pilkington, chair of the St. Helens glassmakers, provoked "great irritation: CA was a nuisance, didn't understand the problems of industry, was technically shaky." CA admitted as much to the Molony Committee. There were amateurish errors in tests and advice. Legions of apologia were published. Rover received one in 1963 when *Which?* confessed it had used the wrong spark plugs and unjustly criticized the 110 model's performance.[73]

Trade journals warned that *Which?* "has a strong sense of duty to the public, but does it fully recognise its responsibility towards the trade." CA faced four libel suits in this period. One was lost (to the Woodgrange Metal Stamping Co. Ltd. over a report on lead in its frying pans), but two of the others were unresolved. In the case of Imperial Domestic Appliances Ltd., the owner shot himself shortly after his action against *Which?* was dismissed.[74] More positively, by its second number *Which?* could claim to be improving standards in industry: the Co-op Wholesale Society responded to CA criticisms of a kettle's handle and

[70]C. E. Harrison (FBI President) to Sir Arthur Fforde (Chair, BBC Governors), 14 February 1962, CA council minutes (4 June 1962).

[71]Houlton, *Which? Put to the Test*, p. 13. "A Magnifying Glass on Faults," *Garage and Motor Agent* (13 January 1962). Similarly for CU, see Ruby Turner Morris, *CU: Methods, Implications, Weaknesses and Strengths* (New London, Conn., 1971), pp. 54–56.

[72]John Martin, George W. Smith, *The Consumer Interest* (London, 1968), pp. 194–95.

[73]Richard Hoggart, *A Measured Life: Part 3—An Imagined Life* (New Brunswick, 1994), p. 63. The suggestion that a dry battery on a fire was a good soot cleaner required 100,000 postcards to be sent to prevent subscribers following the advice, Roberts, *Which? 25*, p. 38. "Rover 110," *Which?* (June 1963): 189.

[74]*Which?* (Winter 1958): 21. CA, "Notes for CA speakers," p. 9. Transcript, interview Alistair Macgeorge, pp. 135–37. CAA A13.

spout. In 1966 Roberts' reported a number of safety measures taken post-*Which?* reports. BMC were interested in *Motoring Which?*'s tests on chrome corrosion. Although more often, as Morris managers told in 1965, motor manufacturers felt *Which?* was biased against them.[75]

CA was at pains to stress producers and retailers, whatever their instinctive unease, could use its research. Crosland repeatedly asked, "what influence is CA having on manufacturers?" Lord Sainsbury, president of the supermarket chain, explained in 1969: "my own firm welcomed the establishment of the Consumers' Association...because we believe that responsible retailers could benefit from a better informed consumer." But Sainsbury, a noted supporter of Labour's social democrats, was an exception to judge by an early London School of Economics (LSE) study, that found *Which?*'s influence on business "very slight."[76]

CA asserted the credibility besides independence of its testing and sampling. Its propensities were scientific, but it also improvised—in 1963, 100 people walked each day for six months over select carpets to test their durability.[77] Whatever criticism its car testing drew, the novelty of its efforts was endorsed by authoritative pens, like ex-Formula One racing driver Tony Brooks, the Observer's motoring correspondent.[78]

III

Another criticism, leveled by the Molony Report, was that CA's council was "oligarchic and self-perpetuating." In response, the number of "ordinary members" who elected the council was extended from 231 to 1,343 in 1968. Until then, the council selected "ordinary members." "Associate members" (without voting rights) could now apply, subject to council vetting.[79] Vetting prevented a takeover by manufacturers or advertisers. But the seeming indifference of CA

[75]*Which?* (Winter 1958): 3. "Eirlys Roberts Writes," *Which?* (June 1966): 179. Healy, "Reactions to the Car Supplement" CA Council minutes (12 February 1962). Transcript of interview with Jennifer Jenkins, p. 128. CAA A13.

[76]Crosland, in Roberts, "CA's part in the design of Products." Casper Brook, "*Which?*—the catalyst," *The Manager* (July 1961), pp. 540–42. Sainsbury introducing Goldman, "Art or Science?," p. 1. K. Gales, T. M. F. Smith, "A Pilot Study of the Impact of *Which?*" (LSE, May 1961), p. 11, CAA A27.

[77]"The How and Why of *Which?*," pp. 10, 31. Jeremy Mitchell, "Testing for *Which?*: Some Statistical Problems," *Applied Statistics* 12, 2 (1963). Casper Brook, "Research by Consumers," Economics Section, British Association for the Advancement of Science, Annual Meeting (1961), CAA A27. *Which?* (March, April 1963).

[78]Francis Williams, "Which? paper do you read?," *New Statesman* (19 January 1962).

[79]Final Report of the Committee on Consumer Protection, Cmnd. 1781 (July 1962), para. 388. Thorelli and Thorelli, *Consumer Information Handbook*, pp. 14–15.

members was also a barrier to wholesale democratization. CA estimated its "very active" members, who joined local groups on top of subscribing to *Which?*, at around 20,000 in 1962—6% of the membership. Yet "ordinary" membership was much smaller than this. As much as CA aspired to a constituency wider than its own members and to "popularising the idea of discriminating consumption," it also faced activating its own members. A reportedly high turnover of members also sustained the council's control.[80]

However, as Jim Northcott, a founder member of CA's 1956 prototype, the British Association of Consumers (BAC), has noted, CA's "democratization" prevailed against its wider aims, since the membership were less radically-minded than the council. A 1964 survey revealed that by far the most popular newspaper of CA members was the *Daily Telegraph* (one of "the posh papers"). Gallup reported in 1962 that most *Which?* subscribers were "intent on value for money," but that there was "no evidence that members joined for the purpose of achieving reform, reform being taken in the sense of manufacturing better goods for all, as a desirable end in itself."[81] For some, this weighed against extending democracy. Crosland argued, "people join CA (as it now is)...to purchase a service, namely, reports of consumer tests" and this made it more "like the AA or RAC...than a political party or trade union" and majority rule less pressing. Indeed democracy would escalate "the risk of capture by an unscrupulous minority pressure group" since (in a revealing phrase) most CA members "would be incapable of an intelligent selection amongst competing candidates."[82]

CA's coterie were an elite of experts—many with Civil Service backgrounds and ten of the fifteen council members in 1967 Oxbridge educated; and mostly male—as early as 1958 there were calls for more women members on council.[83] Politically, it attempted to be neutral. The Conservative was Phillip Goodhart for most of this period. Dick Hornby had been the intended replacement for the first, Geoffrey Ripon, but was barred by his consultancy work for United States' advertisers J. Walter Thompson. Vice-president Jennifer Jenkins supplied a note with her Labour M.P. husband's appraisal of the candidates to replace Ripon. Plumping for Goodhart, it described Ted Leather as a "show-off," Julian

[80]Draft, "Who Reads *Which?*," p. 7. Paper "C," CA council minutes (13 September 1959). Houlton, *Which? Put to the Test*, p. 13.

[81]Interview, Jim Northcott, 14 February 2001. Mitchell, "Results of Questionnaire" (1964), pp. 12. Gallup Poll, *Which?: Final Report* (May–September 1962), p. 2. CAA A14.

[82]Crosland, "The Constitution of CA" (21 January 1964), Crosland Papers, LSE, 4/1.

[83]For example Maurice Healy came to CA from the Minister's Office at the Board of Trade. CA council minutes (9 January 1958) Thorelli and Thorelli, *Consumer Information Handbook*, p. 14.

Ridsdale as "rather stupid," and Enoch Powell as "able and clever, but unbalanced." Crosland, too, was "very much against" Powell.[84]

CA confessed to "a predominance of LSE people, Hampstead residents and...left-wing intellectuals" amongst its leaders. As its sense of expertise could inflect CA's approach and annoy members, so could its metropolitan and left leanings. A 1965 survey found some potential subscribers were put-off by perceptions of CA as "'anti-business,' iconoclastic or 'left-wing.'" *Which?* was distributed from Hertford, but CA staff were not a suburban breed. Attempts to move to Harlow in 1964 were thwarted by London staff and lead to Casper Brook's resignation. As Brook's assistant Alistair MacGeorge, remembered, "the New Town...and Harlow in particular, were not exactly...bastions of cultivated life, as far as CA's staff were concerned."[85]

The "active members" of the BAC, besides Young, Northcott (like Brook at *The Economist* Intelligence Unit), and the Goodmans, included staff from Political and Economic Planning (PEP); the British Productivity Council; the Government Social Survey; Anne Jackson (former head of the Board of Trade's Consumer Needs Division) and LSE historian Donald Watt. Its wider network included Joan Robins of the National Council of Women and Gerald Gardiner QC, later Wilson's Lord Chancellor, who re-assured the group that test reports would not necessarily incur the libel laws. Conservatives included the Bow Group's Michael Haynes and M.P.s John Vaughan-Morgan and Patricia Mclaughlin. From Labour were M.P.s Arthur Bottomley, Bert Oram, John Edwards, Sydney Irving, and Elaine Burton (a longstanding consumer campaigner).[86]

The Labour revisionist presence in CA circles was discernible. An early pet project borrowed from revisionism—though scuppered through fear of endangering test impartiality—was to buy a share in Britain's leading fifty companies. Young, in turn, backed revisionist projects.[87] Discriminating readers might be wondering at the relationship between consumerism and quitting Labour. Bill Rodgers was a Good Food Club council member from 1965; Dick Taverne joined CA council in 1965 and Shirley Williams (Prices and Consumer Protection Minister, 1974–76) replaced Crosland on it in 1964. All later quit La-

[84]CA Council minutes (7 July, 5 August, 3 November 1958).

[85]Notes of informal Council meeting, Oaklands Park Hotel, Weybridge, (14–15 October 1961), p. 13. "Weybridge File," council papers. Rodnight, "A Small-scale Psychological Survey," p. 22. Transcript, interview with MacGeorge, p. 133.

[86]British Association of Consumers (November 1956), CAA A27.

[87]CA Council minutes (17 November 1957). Also "Weybridge File" notes, p. 12. Gaitskell attended CA's 1958 Christmas party, council minutes (5 January 1959). Young was co-funder of Mark Abrams, Richard Rose, *Must Labour Lose?* (Harmondsworth, 1960).

bour—as did Young when the Social Democratic Party (amongst whose founders were Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers) formed in 1981. Douglas Houghton, Denis Howell, Gordon Borrie (a Birmingham Consumer Group founder), and Michael Summerskill (later 1960s chair of the National Federation of Local Consumer Groups) were other CA revisionists of note. The social democratic link was evident elsewhere—such as between "Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Verbraucherverbande" and West Germany's SPD.[88]

The Board of Trade's Parliamentary Secretary, John Rodgers M.P., told Brook in 1959 that he considered only one of its Vice Presidents and council members—Dame Katherine Elliot (later Consumers' Council chair and ex-chair of the National Union of Conservative Associations)—to be on the political right. "Too many," Rodgers continued, "did ring a bell left of the political centre," for CA "to claim complete political impartiality."[89] These included the Liberal and Labour Party leader's wives;[90] Jennifer (married to revisionist Labour MP Roy) Jenkins; Sir Julian Huxley (a CND founder); Francis Williams (ex-*Daily Herald* editor); trade unionist Jack Tanner and Gerald Gardiner, besides Young. Recruiting Tories was difficult—Lady Macmillan rejected a Vice-Presidency—but greatly occupied CA. Young recommended Conservatives like Robert Appleby (Black and Decker managing director and an FBI/CBI advisor) to "ordinary membership" to redress the perceived imbalance.[91]

There were Conservative influences—James Douglas, a CA founder and council member from 1960, became Director of the Conservative Party Research Department (for which he had worked since 1950) in 1970. Peter Goldman, CA's director 1964–87, was a firmly "one nation" Tory and director of the Conservative Political Centre from 1955. Goldman came to CA having lost a by-election in the supposedly safe, Tory, suburban, commuter seat of Orpington in 1962. This was commonly ascribed (besides a credit squeeze and the anti-Semitism of foes and allies) to "the lack of provision of shopping facilities to serve rapid population growth" being blamed on the local Tory establishment.

[88] *Good Food Guide* (1965–66): 6; *Which?* (August 1966): 259; CA Council minutes (14 December 1964). Borrie was Director General of the Office of Fair Trading, 1976–92, Labour's Social Justice Commission chair, 1992–94, and succeeded Rodgers as ASA chair in 2002. Morse, *The Consumer Movement*, p. 201.

[89] Report of Rodgers-Brook meeting (16 December 1958), CA Council minutes (5 January 1959).

[90] Dora Gaitskell was a "simple lifer" of sorts, like Laski—"whom no one...thought of as having any domestic interests whatever," Roberts, *Which? 25*, p. 25. CA had a certain immunity to worldly trappings—as Young expressed distaste for Hollywood's "unreal world of wealth and trivial emotions," Labour Party Research Department (LPRD), Rd. 43, "Enjoyment of Leisure" (February 1947).

[91] Director's letter 11, CA minutes (9 March 1960). "Nominations for Ordinary membership," CA council minutes (12 February 1962). TUC, *Annual Report* (1958), pp. 292–93.

Interviewed by five Labour members for CA's directorship, Goldman's appointment was resisted by Crosland.[92]

The perception that CA leaned leftwards—again like CU, which was subject to Communist accusations and later targeted by McCarthyism—was one reason why it was not appointed to the Molony Committee in 1959.[93] Equally, that Rodgers also told Brook he thought CA "a very considerable force" meant there was something to CA's claim to credit for the Committee's creation and the Consumer Council that resulted from it. In discussions of Molony, Young told CA council, "we are obviously partly responsible for this report."[94]

CA was actually "fairly nervous" that Molony might steal its thunder by funding a rival tester of goods.[95] An emergency council in October 1961 stressed the expansion of CA's comparative testing, to raise the cost and thereby decrease the likelihood of a Conservative or Labour government funding a testing rival. Ultimately, Molony concurred with CA that a testing body should be "independent of industrial, commercial and advertising interests and free from government influence."[96]

CA's success was also an excuse for the Consumers' Council's abolition after the 1970 election. The Conservative manifesto had praised its efforts, but Anthony Barber's post-election "mini budget" ended its grant. In the penultimate *Focus*, the Council warned consumers "now you're on your own," but the government disagreed. Heath, who had been President of the Board of Trade when the Council was established, now thought that the answer to the question of "whether the work that is required for the consumer should be done by a government-sponsored body" was "that there are now other organisations." The prime minister's policy was one of "not using public money for objectives which can be achieved by private enterprise concerns using private money." These were references to CA. [97]

[92]Correspondence, James Douglas (8 January 2003). John Ramsden, *The Making of Conservative Party Policy: The Conservative Research Department since 1929* (London, 1980), ch. 10. Ken Young, "Orpington and the 'Liberal Revival'," in *By-Elections in British Politics*, eds., Chris Cook, John Ramsden (London, 1997), p. 171. Peter Goldman, *Some Principles of Conservatism* (London, 1961), Transcript, interview with Goldman, p. 2.

[93]See Morse, *Consumer Movement*, ch. v.

[94]Rodgers-Brook meeting (16 December 1958). Young in CA Council minutes (30 July 1962).

[95]Transcript of interviews with Elizabeth Ackroyd, Maurice Healy. CAA, A13, pp. 65, 113.

[96]"Weybridge File" notes, pp. 1–2. It was noted the Liberals were against a state subsidy. CA, *Evidence Submitted to the Departmental Committee on Consumer Protection* (March 1960), pp. 15–16, CAA A31. Cmnd.1781, para.851.

[97] *Focus* (January 1971): 1, 23–24.

Without over-playing this as evidence of an early (and later abandoned) neo-liberal agenda of cutting public spending—since the council's grant, at £240,000, was hardly substantial—that something of a u-turn was effected in 1972 with the appointment of a Minister for Consumer Affairs does lend such an interpretation some credence. Consumerists like Crosland charged Heath with pursuing a *laissez faire* dogma, but that it was flawed since, "competition will not work properly unless the consumer is well informed." And Crosland deduced consumers were not well informed, not least since there was "so little public protest" at the dismantling of the Consumer Council. Consumerists (and from Crosland's point of view, Labour too) felt they had to contend not only with the Tory government but public attitudes and indifference also.[98] Many at CA suspected the appointment of Des Wilson as the Council's next director had sealed its fate. Wilson was the radical director of Shelter, the national campaign for the homeless and likened by some to Ralph Nader.[99]

If not *on* the left, CA's founding figures and thinking were *of* the left. Like Labour, it saw a "world of bewildering variety, controlled to an increasing degree by large companies," in which "the consumer stands almost alone." The vital difference was CA's embrace of the consumer, whom it imagined convening and educating—but a category with which the formal left was uneasier. The left instinctively suspected consumerism of indulging insatiable wants rather than meeting legitimate needs and valued labour more highly than consumption. It was not as though Conservatives easily embraced what they often saw as cavalier materialism, but the left's puritans were particularly vocal. The reservations about consumers themselves such opinions often contained, remained latent in CA.[100]

There was support in Labour circles for a consumer advisory service. Young first proposed a scheme in 1950 and it was periodically revived, such as by Northcott's 1953 Fabian pamphlet. [101] Consumer protection debates at Labour Women's conferences regularly applauded CA. But on the whole the preference was for state protection. Thus while they dismissed on grounds of cost the advice

[98]C. A. R. Crosland, *Socialism Now* (London, 1973), p. 87. The extent of Heath's neo-Thatcherism is discussed in Ewen Green, "Thatcherism: An Historical Perspective," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 9 (1999).

[99] *Focus* (September 1970): 14. Thorelli and Thorelli, *Consumer Information Handbook*, p. 167.

[100]Labour Party, *Fair Deal for the Shopper* (London, 1961), p. 6. See Martin Smith, *The Consumer Case for Socialism* (London, 1986), pp. 6–8.

[101]Jim Northcott, *Value for Money? The Case for a Consumers' Advice Service* (London, 1953). The pamphlet ridiculed advertisers claims and was encouraged by Hugh Gaitskell, Northcott to Gaitskell (15 March 1952), Hugh Gaitskell Papers, University College London, F8 and interview, Northcott.

of the free-market Conservative Peter Thorneycroft that disgruntled consumers should consult a solicitor—so was membership of CA at ten shillings per year thought costly.[102]

CA was more born of frustration with Labour's indifference to consumer matters and marginalizing of consumerists like Young. Presciently, Elaine Burton wrote to Hugh Gaitskell early in 1956 warning, "the time is ripe to deal further with this consumers" angle or "it will be 'lifted' from us entirely." Burton was referring to CA's imminence besides direct political competition. Labour's insouciance remained in some measure despite (if not because of) CA's lobbying. A Glasgow delegate to the 1970 Labour Women's conference felt this had been fatal in the election and that "more should have been said about the Trade Description Act," passed in 1968 in order to give a better impression "about what the Labour government had done for the consumer." [103]

Symptomatic of the Labour movement's standoffishness towards modern consumerism, the Co-op rejected the Gaitskell Commission's modernizing proposals in 1958. CA was disappointed at this, feeling the Co-op was failing consumers' expectations and its own aspirations. But for its part the Co-op was critical of CA's vision. Echoing consumer-sceptics like Raymond Williams and J. B. Priestley, who felt the category of consumers was complicit with capitalism, private acquisitiveness, and a restricted view of citizens, the head of economics research at the International Co-Operative Alliance argued in 1963 that, "to inform a consumer about the relative merits of different products enables him to become a discriminating consumer rather than an *active* consumer," and as such "his role is still essentially a passive one."[104]

Young had a background in PEP besides Labour's Research Department. PEP's *Planning* had asked in the 1930s: "When will Consumers wake up?" and stressed consumer besides producer responsibilities—"the British consumer who always eats whatever is set before him must share with the British restaurant and hotel the reproach of falling behind French standards of cooking and service." A 1935 article wondered, "can the consumer form some sort of 'trade union' which will look after his interests" or "set...up voluntary research associations." Links remained—Ray Goodman chaired PEP in the early 1950s and

[102]See *Labour Women's Conference* (1958), pp. 15–17; (1959), p. 45; (1963), pp. 29–30. Also *Labour Women* (February 1958).

[103]Burton to Gaitskell (24 February 1956), Gaitskell Papers, C310. *Labour Women's Conference* (1970), p. 27.

[104]F. D. Boggis, "Which? Way," *Co-operative Party Monthly Newsletter* (September 1963), and Casper Brook, in RICA, *British Co-Operatives: A Consumers' Movement* (London, 1964), pp. 3, 31–32.

it joined the burgeoning debate on consumer protection or enlightenment in 1960.[105]

Many expected Labour to enact the consumer advisory service idea Young inserted into the 1950 manifesto, but Harold Wilson's assessment at the Board of Trade was that cost outweighed likely benefit. Young deduced from this that (unlike Sweden) state involvement in testing of goods was likely to curbed by cost; the resonance of the idea, since it topped a Gallup Poll of popular manifesto proposals; and (from a Treasury Solicitor) that the libel laws would not prevail against such an exercise.[106]

Young was disenchanted with the bureaucracy that accompanied *dirigisme* under Attlee. This was registered in his 1949 pamphlet *Small Man, Big World*, as was a sense that the limits to popular participation in state schemes made voluntary activity more practical. In *Small Man, Big World*, Young reflected on the "problem of apathy" and how "often there seem to be far more opportunities than people wishing to take advantage of them." Disappointment that the people seemed not to have responded to Labour's state initiatives was common on the left. But using the state to bypass it or as a Fabian study of the nationalized industries' consumer councils suggested, de-centralization to local government, were commoner responses than turning to a voluntarist approach, as Young did.[107]

There was a DIY sense to CA at its outset, of an unpaid, volunteer corps of amateur, dedicated pioneers.[108] Edward Shils described Young in 1960 as a "bold amateur"—realizing innovative organizations against the odds. There might be no British Nader, but, as Daniel Bell put it, likening Young to Victorian social researchers and reformers from Chadwick to Booth, there was "no American figure like Michael Young."[109] Although through the 1960s the renaissance

[105]PEP, "When will the consumer wake up?," *Planning* 89 (29 December 1936), p. 2; "The Needs of the Consumer" *Planning* 36 (23 October 1934), p. 4; "The Outlook for Consumers," *Planning* 63 (3 December 1935): 3. "Consumer Protection and Enlightenment," *Planning* 441 (25 April 1960).

[106]L. Freedman, G. Hemingway, *Nationalisation and the Consumer*, Fabian Research Series, 139 (1950), p. 3. LPRD, R. 176, "A Consumer Advisory Service" (November 1952). Correspondence, Young, 19 March 2001.

[107]Michael Young, "Economic Planning and Nationalisation," in *Fabian Society, Czechoslovakia: Six Studies in Reconstruction* (London, 1948); idem., *Small Man, Big World: A Discussion of Socialist Democracy* (London, 1949), p. 9; Peter Wilmott and Michael Young, *Family and Kinship in East London*(1957; reprint Harmondsworth, 1986). Freedman and Hemingway, *Nationalisation*.

[108]See recollections of the cramped, sloping *Which?* offices at Great St. James Street, Jeremy Mitchell, "A Triptych of Organisation: CA, SSRC, NCC," in Geoff Dench, Tony Flower, Kate Gavron, eds., *Young at Eighty: The Prolific Public Life of Michael Young* (Manchester, 1995), p. 10.

[109]Edward Shils, "On the Eve," *Twentieth Century* (May 1960): 452. Daniel Bell, "Introduction," in Michael Young, *Social Scientist as Innovator* (Cambridge Mass., 1983), p. ix.

men and women lending a hand to all manner of activities, gave way to a degree of professionalization and specialization. Likewise, the social vision possessing CA increasingly indulged its audience's tastes.

By 1960, in *The Chipped White Cups of Dover*, Young contended "class based on production is slowly giving way to status based on consumption as the centre of social gravity" in modern Britain. Since Labour and the Conservatives were producer-dominated, he proposed a consumers' party. The Fabians refused to publish Young's free thinking. Although the suggestion Labour could accommodate itself to a progressive, consumer politics did recommend itself to the revisionist likes of Crosland, who argued, "a left-wing party should always be in the van of consumer radicalism." A Gallup poll found twenty-five percent of voters would support Young's new party—and more Conservative than Labour voters from the 1959 election, suggesting that, as with CA, it was a mainly Conservative audience that was mobilized by consumer issues. Young envisioned a "one nation" party to arrest Britain's decline—discerning consumers would improve the production quality and competitiveness of industry and offset the wage-price spiral in a way the producerist main parties could not.[110]

But some *Which?* research confounded Young's vision of "one nation" of consumers, finding conflict at the point of sale rife between customers and sales assistants. One assistant complained, "we are treated by the majority of middle class customers as the domestics were treated 50 years ago"; another, endorsing the Victorian domestics analogy, added, "the newly affluent working classes are equally overbearing." For their part, customers were "fed-up with shop assistants who have no knowledge of the goods they are selling." CA was a product of the demise of traditional shop assistants and growth of self-service shopping. CA (and the labeling it put great store by) were substitute knowledge sources for the supermarket era. In this role CA was perceived, so one assistant recounted, as accountable for customers who were "after their 'rights' which are being drummed into them, but...do not know their 'responsibilities.'"[111]

To judge from the way the main parties clamored to associate themselves with its success, CA was a potent political commodity. *Which?*'s tenth anniversary edition—a "washing-machine edition" with fourteen pages of tests of twin-tubs and automatics—carried congratulations from Wilson, Heath, and Liberal leader, Jeremy Thorpe. The politics of goods such as washing machines were made (in part) by CA charging them with qualities of national economic per-

[110]Young, *Chipped White Cups*, pp. 19–20. Crosland, *The Conservative Enemy*, p. 66. Trevor Smith, Alison Young, "Politics and Michael Young," in Dench, et.al., *Young at Eighty*, p. 138 notes the irony of Shirley Williams being the incumbent Fabian Chair.

[111]"Customers write...Shop Assistants Write," *Which?* (November 1967): 356–57. See also Barbara Usherwood, "'Mrs Housewife and Grocer': the advent of self-service shopping in Britain," in *All the World and Her Husband: Women in Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture*, Maggie Andrews, Mary M. Talbot, eds. (London, 2000).

formance and consumers' skills—nothing less indeed than the state of the nation. At the same time CA was anxious to impress with the sort of political audience it could command. Tribute to CA's success in raising consumerism's political stock was further evident in the flurry of party political interest that accompanied the imminent Molony Report.[112]

Young periodically revived the idea of a consumer party, telling the audience at a 1967 celebration of CA's first decade, including government ministers Crosland (Board of Trade) and Tony Benn (Technology): "our strength is the votes which consumers command...as I see it we are serving notice on the long-established political parties...if they fail to serve this newly asserted consumer interest." One speaker, endorsing Young's vision, asked "is not the quality of our environment more important than washing machines?" Others were "scared" of a wider political role, fearing it "could endanger...the integrity and independence...of our Association." For all the celebrations, Young detected in the party leaders' plaudits, that the consumer movement (CA included) was too "accepted and respectable." He bid the conference to a "spirit of militancy," for, "while the consumer movement has been expanding, the country of which it is part has been declining."[113]

Young's speech to the 1964 IOCU conference was also cautionary. It highlighted three (Galbraithian) dichotomies facing the consumer movement: between the needs of rich and poor consumers; between commercial goods and public services; and between the standard of living and quality of life. So far as the third was concerned, Young wondered, "is there nothing to the good life except more and more refrigerators and TV-sets?"—"are...consumers in fundamental agreement with industrialists...that all that is necessary to the good life is to produce more, better and cheaper goods?" Young felt that a full life need not be a life fuller of consumer goods, indeed "a fuller life...may for some people also be a simpler life." By now sounding like William Morris (if not a hippie), Young felt people might "make rational choices" and achieve "individual fulfillment" through "creative" or "costless pleasures...the open air, the trees, the sky." Consumerism, he urged, "should be ready for them." At 1970's IOCU, Young combated influential (especially after 1968) critics like Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse, whose contempt for affluence was compounded

[112]*Which?* (October 1967): 292–93. Liberal Party, *Shopping: Better Buys* (1961), and *Consumer Protection* (1962); Labour, *Fair Deal*; Phillip Goodhart, James Douglas, Patricia Mclaughlin, John Wood, Max Bemrose, Ian MacArthur, *Choice: A Report on Consumer Protection* (Conservative Political Centre, London, 1961); M. Haynes, *Advertising on Trial: The Case for the Consumer* (Bow Group, London, 1961) For CA's view of these *Which?* (December 1961): 307.

[113]"Proceedings of Consumer Assembly," pp. 22–23, 28, 34, 38. At 1975's National Consumer Congress Young argued "Governments now know that elections are consumers' elections," Ronald Wraith, *The Consumer Cause* (London, 1976), p. 6.

by the impression that it induced conformism in consumers. Young countered that the consumer movement aimed to ensure "consumers can benefit from th[e] variety" of goods and spending power "instead of being overwhelmed by it."[114]

IV

Studies of middle-class activism in the 1950s have often focused on CND, yet CA was no more recondite. A "child...of the affluent society," profiting from "the rapid growth of purchasing power," CA was as much constitutive of affluence as a product of it—and it construed affluence as a critic more than cheerleader. It felt it had re-defined, even invented, the "consumer." "Once upon a time there were no consumers, only people—hurrying in and out of shops...the word consumer...was a technical term," Brook told the LSE in 1960, but now "one regularly sees or hears mentioned...consumer protection...representation...education...research" and "*Which?* and CA...have played an important part in bringing about this change by arousing interest in consumer matters."[115] Without overselling CA, discerning historians of post-war Britain would be hard pushed to discount its influence in advancing consumer interests.

For its members CA represented an attempt at differentiation from workers emulating their lifestyles, but also—in the mind's eye of its founders—to equip newly affluent Britons to manage their spending power. CA was trying to make affluence better. CA's educative impulses were recognizably BBC-like—positively (or negatively, as those who experienced it as do-gooders suggested) Victorian at times. Rational consumption (like recreation), self-help, and improvement were CA's bywords—although a voluntarism in tandem with the state. Common ground can be identified between post-war consumerism, individualism, and aspirational values under Thatcher (herself an invoker of "Victorian values"). Besides the "last Victorian," Briggs dubs Young a "social entrepreneur." Another parallel was with Mass Observation (MO), surveyors of "ordinary" life from the 1930s. Like CA, MO aimed via field research, to speak for the voiceless, but this broader vision proved hard to realize. Mary Adams, head of BBC TV talks and instrumental in broadcasting *Choice*, had been a key MO recruiter and was CA chair 1958–59 while Young was at Stanford.[116]

That CA lends itself to multiple readings demonstrates *Which?*craft's eclecticism. The air of what Marwick termed inter-war "middle opinion"—the inter-war "third way"—was redolent in CA's attempt to synthesize elements of left

[114]Report of IOCU, 3rd Conference, Oslo (June 1964), pp. 133–37. CAA A21. Briggs, *Young*, *p. 285.*

[115]Briggs, *Young*, *p. 285. Unpublished Draft for New Society, "Cool Customers" (December 1963), p. 1. Casper Brook, "Development and Problems of Consumers' Association,"* LSE Seminar on Problems in Industrial Administration (2 February 1960), p. 1, CAA A27.

[116]Marwick, *Sixties*, p. 802. Penny Summerfield, "Mass-Observation: social research or social movement?," *Journal of Contemporary History* 20 (1985).

and right and collectively articulate individual consumerism. CA has been cast as a quintessentially modernist project—rational, scientific and forward-looking vis-à-vis post-modernism's playful, nostalgic, and aesthetic qualities. It also exhibited the key characteristics of modernity deployed in a recent (Giddens influenced) account of post-war Britain—expert knowledge systems tailored to an expanded sense of self and popular choice.[117]

Hilton's situating of CA in an evolution of consumer politics that in conditions of abundance not scarcity "acted more as a 'watchdog' to business rather than a radical alternative to it," accepted the business imperatives of the Molony Committee and an "individualist-customer" rather than "active-citizen" consumer, reverberates with contemporary critics like the Co-op, Priestley, or Williams. For Hilton, that CA's vision tallied with classical economic models eased its relations with the state, but diminished its potential as an alternative politics. CA wished to insert consumerism into the corporatist/market consensus not contest it. However much this was so, it neglects the extent to which CA conceived itself an "information co-op."[118]

Elsewhere, Hilton has suggested CA activists are best understood as a professional habitus (in Bourdieu's terms), deciding their own disposition on consumer issues, self-determining rather than fashioned by their middle-class status. But this compelling account of its activist milieu and world outlook marginalizes the issue of CA's audience. CA was not at liberty to construct and articulate a consumer politics irrespective of its audience. Its character and fortunes were not determined by its audience, but constrained by it in significant ways—both those that remained beyond CA's reach and the participation of many of its own members. This curbed CA's broader intentions and ambitions, resulting in its sometimes disparaging tone towards consumers and its chief success being to tail middle class living. To reach less affluent consumers, state intervention proved necessary, in the form of the NCC. Turner Morris' conclusions that the United States' CU, "services the affluent and privileged"; that its legislative efforts benefitted the poor more than CU itself (hinting at limits to independent consumer politics); and that ultimately, "the social reformers who started...Consumers Union hoped for a mass movement; they got a class movement," recommend themselves for CA too.[119]

[117]A. Marwick, "Middle Opinion in the Thirties: Planning, Progress and Political 'Agreement,'," *English Historical Review* 79 (1964). Alan Aldridge, "The Construction of Rational Consumption in *Which?* magazine: The More Blobs the Better?," *Sociology* 28, 4 (1994). Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, Chris Waters, eds., *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945–64* (London, 1999).

[118]Hilton and Daunton, "Material Politics," p. 25; "Consumer Politics," p. 257; and "The Female Consumer," p. 128. Michael Young, *Marieanne Rigge, Mutual Aid in a Selfish Society* (London, 1979), p. 22.

[119]Matthew Hilton, "The polyester-flannelled philanthropists: the Birmingham Consumers' Group and affluent Britain," in *An Affluent Society? Britain's "Golden Age" Revisited*, eds., Lawrence

Far from transcending the existing political parties "interests," CA experienced a related problem in its struggle to reach significantly beyond the ranks of already comparatively advantaged consumers. That a consumer "interest" of more far-reaching possibilities was difficult to convene, suggests the extent of change ushered in by affluence was quite partial and mapped onto existing patterns of class, wealth, and gender. The reluctance of the consumer to emerge more singularly onto the stages of citizenship and politics was then not only due to CA's articulacy or conception of them. Not least, in indubitably raising the political salience of the consumer "interest," its discourse was assimilated by official politics. In this respect CA shifted the boundaries of "the political." The speed of assimilation was tribute to CA's success as much as its ease signaling its shortcomings, if also tribute to the ability of parties to refurbish their identities for electoral (if not membership) purposes. Like CA, their remit was not limitless, but enhanced by being able to exercise state power.

CA's discourse cannot solely explain its fortunes, but *Which?*craft does bear significance. Just as CA could not invent its audience, nor did it simply reflect them or social change. Like most elite representations of affluence *Which?*craft inclined towards the need for improvement. CA conceived affluence in austere terms, privileged function and use over pleasure and this limited its purchase on the changes affluence involved. In another CA founding story, it was in 1953, before rationing ended, that the Goodmans' dissatisfaction with British central heating led them to contemplate a British version of *Consumer Reports*. Goldman reflected on CA's founding that: "they got the timing...by judgment or by accident, absolutely right...when all forms of rationing...had just ended; when the shops were beginning to fill with...merchandise and people clustered for the information like hungry paupers round a soup kitchen." Central heating and soup kitchens conjure up an austerity and necessity—Cripps' Britain, more than the luxuries of choice and indecision affluence afforded. *Which?* editor Eirlys Roberts—who on an everyday basis "set the tone for the magazine"—personified this. She was educated in classics at Cambridge; worked with the UNO relief agency in post-war Albania and as a Public Relations Officer for Cripps' Treasury; lived in a shabby, late Georgian house in London's King's Cross and drove a ten-year old 1952 Morris Minor.[120] If, *pace* CA, symbolic store is put by lifestyle, this said much about CA.

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Black, Hugh Pemberton (Aldershot, 2004), and *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain*. Morris, *CU: Methods, Implications*, pp. 52–53.

[120]Transcript, interview with Goldman, p. 3. Peter Clarke, *The Cripps Version* (London, 2002), pt. six. "The Woman Behind a Hard Look at Cars," *Topic* (20 January 1962).